Green-Energy Policies Viewed as National Model
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Two of hundreds of wind turbines at Altamont Pass near Tracy in Northern California

Since passage of Assembly Bill 32, the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, the Golden State has been pumping up efforts to get its energy policy in top shape.

Its sweeping action plan is widely viewed as a national model for pursuing renewable energy and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

In November 2008, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed an executive order that raised the state's targeted renewable-energy standard to 33 percent by 2020 – the most aggressive standard in the country. To reach it, Californians must grow the state's solar, wind and geothermal energy assets. To further encourage the growth of green energy, the governor's order streamlines the approval process for renewable-energy projects.

One month after the signing of that executive order, the California Public Utilities Commission gave the green light to San Diego Gas and Electric's Sunrise Powerlink electric transmission line. The $1.9 billion project will carry renewable energy that is being developed in the Imperial Valley east of San Diego, says Jennifer Briscoe, SDG&E spokesperson.

"The goal for the Sunrise Powerlink is to fill the 120-mile line with 1,000 megawatts of green energy, which is enough to power 650,000 homes here in San Diego. SDG&E has an agreement with Stirling Energy Systems for more than 750 megawatts of solar energy. We also have two geothermal contracts for a 20-megawatt and a 40-megawatt geothermal facility. We are also interested in wind opportunities," Briscoe says. The company expects Sunrise Powerlink to be fully energized by 2012.

The state's largest electric utility – Southern California Edison – already is the leading purchaser of green power in the United States. In 2007, the company purchased 80 percent of all solar power generated in the United States. Its renewable-energy portfolio contains 1,137 megawatts from wind, 906 megawatts from geothermal, 356 megawatts from solar, 185 megawatts from biomass and 200 megawatts from hydroelectric power sources.

In 2008, SoCal Edison signed contracts to purchase an additional 1,500-plus megawatts of wind energy, and in February 2009, it announced an agreement for 1,300 megawatts of solar thermal power, pending CPUC approval.

Goals Set as Far Ahead as 2050
Along with developing clean, green power, the state is taking measures to improve energy efficiency and drastically reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. Assembly Bill 32 calls for emissions to be decreased to 1990 levels by 2020, with the governor's next goal being a reduction to 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.

In addition, Senate Bill 375 aims to cut carbon-dioxide emissions by reducing driving. The bill, which garnered support from diverse factions such as builders, environmentalists, local governments and affordable-housing advocates, requires cities and counties to improve public transportation and combat urban sprawl. Under the law, regional planning authorities must develop workable strategies for meeting emission-reduction targets to be eligible for transportation funding.

Energy-conservation programs for businesses and homeowners represent another key component of the state's overall strategy. For example, Southern California Gas Co. offers free, on-site energy audits for commercial customers. "Since late 2005, we have provided assessments for more than 100 of our largest customers – industrial end users that spend more than $500,000 per year for natural gas," says Raul Gordillo, public relations advisor with the company. "Those who implement our recommendations save about 8 percent to 12 percent of their total energy use. Some save 30 percent to 50 percent."

A recent state law enables homeowners to get low-interest loans from cities and counties to install solar panels, dual-pane windows, energy-efficient air conditioners or other environmentally friendly products.

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